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In Memoriam Professor Malina Coleman (1954-2009)

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**IN MEMORIAM
PROFESSOR MALINA COLEMAN
(1954-2009)**

“Independent thinking and rigorous analysis were always encouraged.”

“Excellent—one of the funniest teachers I’ve had.”¹

1. Quotations from anonymous student evaluations.

The University of Akron School of Law community was blessed with having the services of Professor Malina Coleman for over twenty years.

Professor Coleman grew up in Akron, Ohio, and graduated from Akron North High School. She received her undergraduate degree from Central State University and her law degree from the Yale Law School. She clerked for a Common Pleas Court in Pennsylvania, practiced law in Akron, and came to work at The University of Akron in 1988.

During the course of a busy life, in addition to teaching at the University of Akron School of Law, she taught one summer at Quinnipiac Law School and in The University of Akron School of Law's summer program in Geneva, Switzerland, in the summer of 2008. Professor Coleman was intellectually curious. While in college she and her sister Jill rented a house that had once been the home of ROTC Professor and U. S. Army Colonel Charles Young. Young was the third African-American graduate of West Point and served with General Pershing in the incursion into Mexico to chase Pancho Villa before World War I. They discovered Young's papers in the house they rented and preserved them. Eventually Malina wrote a biographical sketch of Charles Young and she and her sister made the papers available to history Professor David P. Kilroy, his biography of Young, *For Race and Country: The Life and Career of Colonel Charles Young* (2003).²

Professor Coleman taught in a number of areas including family law, comparative family law, comparative sales law, and basic business. However, her "first love" was contracts. There was something about the area of contracts which fascinated her. Even though the great contracts authority, Samuel Williston, died in 1961, she kept the thirty-one volumes of *Williston On Contracts*, on the shelves of her office, often referring to it as she worked through various issues in contracts. Similarly, it was not surprising for one to come to her office and see her reading something like an issue of the *Harvard Law Review* from the 1890's. When teased about reading something that old, she would insist that it was very important in helping her unravel the contracts issue in which she was particularly interested at that time.

While at the Yale Law School she was inspired by the work Associate Dean James A. Thomas did with students and wanted to do the same for students at Akron. In 1997 she accepted the position as Associate Dean for Students at The University of Akron School of Law.

2. These papers were also used in a later biography, BRIAN G. SHELLUM, *BLACK OFFICER IN A BUFFALO SOLDIER REGIMENT: THE MILITARY CAREER OF CHARLES YOUNG* (2010).

Though the agreement was that she would serve in that position from three-to-five years, she actually served for six years, until 2003, before returning to teaching full time.

She cared deeply about students but believed in “tough love” and held them to high standards. Though most of her experience was as a professor, she always had an eye on the practice of law. She particularly wanted to teach the students good habits so that they would do well as lawyers. She frequently invited groups of students to her home. This was an annual event for students who were members of BLSA when she was the BLSA advisor. On occasion she also invited people from her contracts or other classes to her home.

For almost her entire career at The University of Akron School of Law, Professor Coleman was involved in recruiting or making admissions decisions on applicants to become new law students. For many years she chaired the Admissions Committee. She also was active in visiting days that were organized for prospective students and taught preview classes to visiting applicants.

She had a disciplined mind and was very independent. Among her many interests was the contract implications of surrogate motherhood. In conjunction with two other members of the faculty, she filed an amicus brief on this subject in a case pending in the Summit County Probate Court. She later authored one of the leading articles in that area.³ It has been cited many times in journals published by various law schools including those at American University, Georgetown University, Harvard University, Hastings Law School, the University of Texas, Vanderbilt University and the University of Wisconsin. The article was also cited as authority by the Supreme Court of Tennessee in 2005.⁴

Towards the end of her career Professor Coleman participated in a conference at the Yale Law School involving the continuing problem of slavery. She was enthused about joining a later project to protect innocent people, wherever they were, who were being abused through a system of slavery. She was scheduled for a faculty improvement leave⁵ in spring of 2010 and at the time she passed away, had completed her portions of an article she was co-authoring on the *Dred Scott* case and the bad affects of trying to make excuses for that outrageous decision. She was frequently thanked for her contributions in reading or critiquing the articles of other scholars.

3. Malina Coleman, *Gestation, Intent and the Seed: Defining Motherhood in the Era of Assisted Human Reproduction*, 17 Cardozo L. Rev. 497 (1996)

4. *In re C.K.G.*, 173 S.W.3d 714, 728-29 (Tenn. 2005).

5. Commonly referred to as a sabbatical.

She was devoted to her family. While her mother was still living they would often come to law school events together. She had great love for and concern for all of her family members and would sometimes bring them to the School of Law.

Beyond the law, Professor Coleman was eclectic in her interests. At one time she was President of the Muse Doll Company, a joint venture with her sister Jill in making and selling dolls. She was expert at making teddy bears and they were often brought the highest bid of any item at the annual student auction to support public interest work.

She enjoyed woodworking, making professional quality furniture. She served on the Board of Trustees of the area Girl Scouts organization and was active in promoting and working with the Boys and Girls Club of Akron. She enjoyed gardening and planting flowers. She took pride in the historical house she shared with her sister, Jill, and nephew, Joel, and in the community in which they lived.

No loss, of course, can compare to that which her family has suffered. But the Law School and the world at large has lost one of its best people and one of its finest citizens. Malina Coleman was “one of what we all are . . . a drop in the great blue motion of the sunlit sea” and yet evidence that “some of the drops sparkle . . . some of them do sparkle.”⁶

6. Lerner and Loewe, *Camelot*.